

Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development

Volume 7
Issue 2 *Volume 7, Spring 1993, Issue 2*

Article 5

March 1992

Columbus 500 Years Later: An Environmental Perspective

Philip Weinberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/jcred>

Recommended Citation

Weinberg, Philip (1992) "Columbus 500 Years Later: An Environmental Perspective," *Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/jcred/vol7/iss2/5>

This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact selbyc@stjohns.edu.

COLUMBUS 500 YEARS LATER: AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

PHILIP WEINBERG*

The five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's first voyage provides a useful milestone from which we can view its consequences, environmental as well as social and political. Did Columbus, as traditional learning has it, furnish Spain and Europe with a cornucopia of riches, an almost vacant land in which to settle? Or did he destroy a paradise and unleash a frenzy of genocide and exploitation, as many modern historians believe? I submit that both versions are simplistic, that each distorts the achievements of this navigator in order to serve contemporary political goals.

All can agree that the voyages of Columbus brought to Europe's attention a new world, rich in resources that the conquistadors, and later their French and English counterparts, fell on with rapacity. At their first important landing, on Hispaniola (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Columbus's men found gold nuggets. The Taino Indians, whose misfortune it was to have shown the Spaniards this gold, paid dearly for it. Columbus's crew slaughtered and enslaved the Tainos, dragging hundreds back to Spain to be exhibited.¹ Columbus had explicitly stated that his expedition was designed to bring back spices, gold, and pearls. His own motives may have centered on exploration, but the Spanish crown would hardly have financed an expedition for purely scientific ends. And of course, had Columbus not sailed, another explorer surely would have reached the New World. Only eight years later, the Portuguese explorer Pedro A. Cabral landed in Brazil.

* B.A. 1955, University of Pennsylvania; J.D. 1958, Columbia Law School. Professor of Law, St. John's University School of Law. He is the author of a casebook, *Environmental Law: Cases and Materials* (Associated Faculty Press, 1985) and numerous articles on environmental law.

¹ SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON. *THE EUROPEAN DISCOVERY OF AMERICA: THE SOUTHERN VOYAGES 1492-1616*, at 134-35 (1974); KIRKPATRICK SALE. *THE CONQUEST OF PARADISE* 117 (1990).

The killing of natives and plunder of gold ushered in a hideous era. The Tainos of Cuba and Hispaniola, whom Columbus himself described as "the best people in the world and above all the gentlest,"² were exterminated. Millions of Indians were killed or died of European diseases for which they lacked immunity—six-sevenths of the pre-conquest population of Mexico and Central America.³ The Europeans saw the resources of the Americas—gold, silver, furs, tobacco—as raw materials to be seized. The natives were likewise an exploitable commodity, to be made into slaves if feasible. Even after the Spanish crown barred the enslavement of Indians in 1542, natives in Mexico were condemned to virtual slavery in silver mines.

These depredations irreversibly altered the environment of the Americas. The explorers and settlers cared no more about the land than they did its people. The Spaniards in America extracted the silver from its ore with mercury, a substance extremely dangerous to the water supply and to workers.⁴ The importation of cattle and sheep destroyed vast areas the Indians had farmed, leading to famines and dislocations. This pattern was repeated in North America, where the English settlers cleared forests in which the Indians had hunted and foraged. The old English adage that "sheep eat men," proven in Scotland's infamous Highland clearances after the 1745 uprising in that country, had proven itself again.

In Mexico, the Spaniards wrecked irrigation systems that the Indians had maintained for centuries, as they had earlier destroyed those built by the Moors in Spain itself. The enlightened priest Bartolome de las Casas, who fought almost alone to preserve the Indians' culture from the conquistadors, said Hispaniola was "the first to be destroyed and made into a desert."⁵ The pattern was repeated in Mexico, Central and South America—and again in North America.

The Native American attitude toward the land was far more respectful. Indians truly believed that land was not subject to private

² SALE, *supra* note 1, at 99-100 (quoting from diary of Columbus, Dec. 16, 1492).

³ ERIC WOLF, *SONS OF THE SHAKING EARTH* 195 (1959).

⁴ *Id.* at 177-78.

⁵ SALE, *supra* note 1, at 166 (quoting de las Casas).

ownership, a view that led naturally to concern for conservation. They were appalled at the Europeans' wanton vandalizing of nature and its resources.

Virginia proved profitable for tobacco, a "land-devouring" crop⁶ with great impact on soil and forests. Throughout North America, sixty million beavers were killed for their fur by Europeans and also by Indians who were tempted into the large-scale trapping trade. The destruction of the beaver in turn led to widespread flooding, silting, and erosion as beaver dams disintegrated. Along with beaver, bear, lynx, and cougar, numerous other mammals vanished because of the killing and habitat destruction. The great abundance, of which the French explorer Jacques Cartier had written,⁷ was gone.

As late as 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville described Americans as "insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests that surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet."⁸ This process of devastating natural resources for short-term gain has continued into our own day, at a time when ignorance is no longer an excuse. The Americas' rain forests have shrunk from 3.4 billion acres in 1492 to 1.6 billion today, and an astonishing 25 million acres are still chopped down each year.⁹ In the United States alone, forests have been halved and old-growth forest almost totally wiped out. What little old-growth forest remains in the Northwest is now under assault despite its being a critical habitat for the endangered spotted owl. One hundred forty major species of animals, and countless other species, have become extinct in North America since 1492. It seems all too true, as Montaigne said over 300 years ago, that "we shall have greatly hastened the decline and ruin of this new world by our contagion."¹⁰

But the Europeans were not, as Kirkpatrick Sale and others would have it, despoiling an Eden. The Indians themselves, in Mexico and Central America, practiced human sacrifice on a vast

⁶ *Id.* at 285.

⁷ MORISON, *supra* note 1, at 418.

⁸ ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* 74 (Henry Reeve, trans., 1835).

⁹ MORISON, *supra* note 1, at 136-37; SALE, *supra* note 1, at 363.

¹⁰ SALE, *supra* note 1, at 367 (quoting Montaigne).

scale. The Maya civilization, probably the most architecturally and artistically skilled in all the Americas, destroyed itself through war and famine long before the Spaniards arrived.¹¹ Likewise, famine almost certainly caused the abandonment of settlements at Mesa Verde and Canyon de Chelly in our own Southwest. Indian hunting claimed the large mammals of pre-Columbian America, although none of this remotely equalled the Europeans' vandalization of nature. And no pre-conquest slaughter came close to the genocide practiced by our own North American colonists and pious settlers, who from Jamestown to Wounded Knee "first fell upon their own knees and then upon the aborigines."¹²

What of Columbus in all this? Was he no more than a skilled and intrepid sailor? Or did he indeed commence and share the guilt for the centuries of destruction that followed him? In my view, Christopher Columbus was a man of his time. His acceptance of slavery and of European superiority to "savages" was true of all but the most exceptional men. Among the Spaniards who recorded their thoughts, las Casas stands alone in the conquistador era in his respect for the Indians and the land. Even Washington and Jefferson, centuries later, accepted slavery. To our shame, racism, human slaughter, and contempt for the environment continue to plague us.

Let us respect Columbus, along with Magellan and his few other peers, as a great and brave voyager. But let us pledge to end in our lifetime the evils that the European conquest inflicted on the Americas—evils that persist even today.

¹¹ See generally LINDA SCHELE & DAVID FREIDEL, *A FOREST OF KINGS* (1990).

¹² See JOHN BARTLETT, *FAMILIAR QUOTATIONS* 592 (13th ed. 1955) (quote has been attributed to William Maxwell Evarts (1818-1901), but also to Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. and others).